

# Christian Life and Thought (1789-1921)

Dr. Johannes Zachhuber

# Week 1: The French Revolution and its impact on religious life in Europe

# Reading

- Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the People of Western Europe 1789 – 1970* (1981)
- Alec R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution 1789 to the present day* (1961; reprinted many times since)
- Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers. Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War* (2005)
- John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (1982)
- Charles Tilly, *The Vendee* (2nd edition 1976)
- Geoffrey Ellis, 'Religion according to Napoleon: the Limitations of Pragmatism' in *Religious Change in Europe 1650 – 1914. Essays for John McManners* ed. Nigel Aston (1997)
- Sheryl Kroen, *Politics and Theater in Restoration France 1815 – 1830* (2000) – chapter 5.

# 1. Introduction

- History of Christianity is always relevant for one's own theology
- This is specifically true for the period that is historically closest to our time.
- A crucial threshold is the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century which sees fundamental changes in various aspects of human life (politics, economy, society, science, religion)

# 1. Introduction (ii)

- Its consequences are ambiguous: on the one hand human possibilities are greatly enhanced; on the other, traditional values and certainties are shaken.
- Consequently the 19<sup>th</sup> century sees both a belief in progress and deep rooted skepticism, liberalism and conservatism.
- Consequences for religion are far reaching given its deep inculturation within all areas of human society.

# 1. Introduction (iii)

- Prehistory of the French revolution
- Religious conflict had been rife since the reformation (religious wars in France; Thirty Years' War; English Civil War)
- Peace of Westphalia (1648) gave political powers enormous control over religious minorities
- By the end of 17<sup>th</sup> century: ideas of toleration were espoused against this background (Locke)

## 2. The beginning of the French Revolution and Religion in France

- A) Different Ingredients
- Prior to the revolution the Church was in an ambiguous position: closely tied up with the powers of the *Ancien Regime* which proved increasingly hollow.
- Roman Catholicism was dominant. Toleration for Protestants was minimal, till 1787 practically non-existing.
- Catholic clergy very visible; ordinary life bound up with the institutions of the Church.

## 2. The beginning of the French Revolution ... (ii)

- Criticism was beginning to emerge in two forms:
- *Popular anticlericalism* based on resentment to the privileged position of the Church and the clergy
- Intellectual criticism by philosophers (*philosophes*) like Voltaire and Diderot.
- Enlightenment ideas taken over from England or Holland were developed into a radically antireligious direction.
- Still, *philosophes* interested in reform, not revolution.



## 2. The beginning of the French Revolution ... (iii)

- At the end of 18<sup>th</sup> c. religion appeared moribund.
- Last revival 100 years ago: Jansenism
- Emphasised individual piety and contrition
- Supporters e.g. Racine, Pascal.
- Opposed by Jesuits and by Rome; eventually stamped out by the Church.

## 2. The beginning of the French Revolution ... (iv)

- **B) What happened to the Church in the Revolution?**
- In the early phase the idea was reform rather than destruction of the Church.
- However, relations soon became worse. During the first year of the revolution many privileges of the Church were scrapped (tax exemption; tithes etc.)
- July 1790: Civil Constitution of the Clergy with far reaching changes to the *status quo*.

## 2. The beginning of the French Revolution ... (v)

- The 'Constitution' proved divisive.
- The Pope condemned it.
- The clergy was divided into those accepting it and those who wouldn't ('non jurors')
- From late 1792 things got even worse: priests were imprisoned and killed.
- During the radical phase (1793): active campaign of deChristianisation; introduction of new cults.

# 3. Counter Revolution

- March 1793: the Vendee revolt was partly about religion.
- Increasingly, resistance against the revolution was combined with attempts to restore Catholic service.
- 1795/96: Increase of 'Popular Catholicism'
- 'Thermidore' Coup of 1794 introduced formal separation of Church of state to calm down the conflict

# 3. Counter Revolution (ii)

- Results: Forced deChristianisation had not the desired effect.
- Variations across the country:
- Those who benefited most from the revolution, (urban bourgeoisie) supported antireligious efforts.
- Those who benefited least (rural population) opposed them.
- This division remained important in France throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

# 4. Napoleon

- Napoleon handled matters more pragmatically, with some success.
- “The people must have a religion; this religion must be in the control of the government”.
- 1801: Concordat with the Pope (Pius VII)
- To buttress his own power he supported greater independence of the national Church from Rome (‘Gallicanism’)
- This in turn increased the fascination of ‘ultramontanism’ for many in the Church.
- The abdication of Napoleon (1815) was followed by a religious revival which may have been the stronger for the fact that the restoration did not return the close alliance between throne and altar that had existed before the revolution.

# 5. Some broad themes

- Developments in France were in many ways typical for 19<sup>th</sup> century developments in the rest of Europe.
- ‘Establishment’ meant that political protest was inevitably also anticlerical.
- The relation between religion and intellectual culture remained deeply ambiguous.
- The French revolution heralds the birth of nationalism.
- There is a marked contrast between the ideals of the revolution and the reality of tyranny of bloodshed which remains characteristic for later developments.